

For as long as she can remember, Ashley has known not to wear black if she is also wearing red.

She knows that when a van filled with gang "recruiters" pulls up in her Waukegan neighborhood, she should just keep walking.

And she knows if you are recruited, it can tear a family apart.

Her friends, a brother and a sister have been through it — both members of rival gangs, the siblings had to move away from each other to keep the peace in their family.

Ashley is seasoned in gang life. And she is only 12.

"I try not to be scared, but sometimes they put pressure on you to join," Ashley said. "I don't think I am going to."

Ashley raised her hand Tuesday during an assembly at Miguel Juarez Middle School when Congressman Mark Kirk asked students if their friends had been approached by gang members.

And she wasn't the only one, proving Kirk's point that gangs have moved into the suburbs.

Kirk, a Highland Park Republican, joined federal law enforcement officials from the FBI and ATF to brief 10th District police chiefs, mayors, clergy and teachers on gangs operating in the community.

There are more than 3,000 gang members operating north of Lake-Cook Road, Kirk said.

Seventh- and eighth-graders were also invited, since statistics show middle school age children are most vulnerable to gang recruiting.

"Thirteen years old is the average age of a suburban gang drive-by shooter today," Kirk said.

After the school assembly, Kirk presented a \$100,000 federal grant to Waukegan Police Chief Bill Biang for the Waukegan Gang Intelligence Unit.

Lawrence Hall, 39, of Waukegan, told students he was relieved in 1998 when he was arrested and sent to prison for three years after selling drugs to an undercover officer.

That arrest came almost 20 years after Hall was recruited by a gang.

He had been shot in 1996 by a sawed-off shotgun and stabbed in 1997. But it wasn't until he spent time in prison, that Hall was free from gang life.

Even today, his past still haunts him. A gang tattoo is a permanent reminder of how his former life has cost him apartments and jobs.

"Cowards run in packs and being in a gang is being a coward," Hall said. "I am thankful to God that I am not living that lifestyle today."